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ENVIRONMENT

California As It Was

The **Channel Islands** are
a reminder of a purer time

BY PETER HALDEMAN

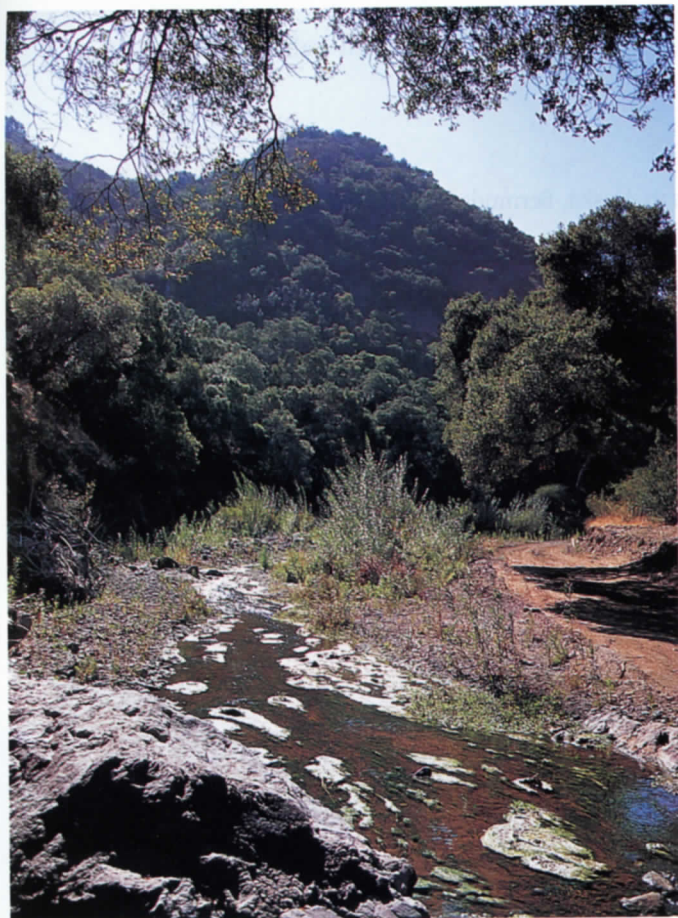


When it's clear, you can see Catalina," goes the Realtor's mantra in the higher elevations of southern California. It's true that after it has rained, or the Santa Ana winds have slammed through the mountain passes and fanned out across the water, the bluish mound can appear as close as a breaching whale. You can practically smell the saltwater taffy. Although locals tend to regard Catalina as a kind of satellite Disneyland, it fully belongs to the archipelago known as the Channel Islands. There are eight of them, anywhere from 11 to 70 miles off the coast between San Diego and Point Conception: the southern islands of Catalina, San Nicolas, San Clemente, and Santa Barbara; and, to the north, Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and San Miguel. Under the right conditions, they are all discernible from the mainland—although you rarely hear people boast about their views of, say, San Nicolas, an outpost of the Pacific Missile Test Center. And on any given day, the Channel Islands are just as likely to lurk behind veils of fog or smog.

The islands appear to owe their existence to a combination of volcanic activity and plate tectonics, which formed their distinctive scarps. Seafaring Chumash and Gabrielino established villages in the dunes, fished with

Scenes from Santa Cruz: Cliffs at Prisoners' Harbor, LEFT, and the Main Ranch, ABOVE.

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Cañada del Puerto, a canyon that leads to Santa Cruz's Central Valley.

carved abalone hooks, and traded with mainland Indians. They numbered in the thousands when Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, a Portuguese explorer in the service of Spain, sighted the chain in 1542. According to ship logs, Cabrillo fell and broke a limb on San Miguel, where he died of gangrene two months later. Russian, British, and American hunters and traders, lured by the fur of the sea otter, dominated the islands for a while—until there were no more otters to be found. By the early 1880's, most of the Indians had been removed to Franciscan missions, where they were decimated by mainland diseases.

Semiarid and self-contained, the islands would hold particular appeal for ranchers. Justinian Caire, a French immigrant, bought Santa Cruz in 1869 and established the first large-scale operation, producing wine, honey, and olives there in addition to raising sheep and cattle. For many years, Santa Cruz and the other northern islands were heavily grazed. A partnership known as Vail & Vickers has reared cattle on Santa Rosa since 1902. And before the U.S. Navy assumed control of San Miguel, Herbert and Elizabeth Lester managed

Rancho Rambouillet—named after the sheep breed—living with their children in a house made of planking from shipwrecks, and entertaining journalists who came to cover their *Swiss Family Robinson* lifestyle. The navy arrived on the scene in the early thirties, appropriating several of the islands for weapons testing. In the early months of World War II, shortly after the navy announced its intention to use San Miguel for bombing practice, Herbert Lester walked to a favorite knoll on the island's north side and shot himself dead.

In view of the hunting and bombing and grazing—which, unchecked, would denude and erode any landscape—the most remarkable thing about the Channel Islands may be that nature has managed to maintain the upper hand. Isolated and ecologically unique, the chain still flaunts hundreds of miles of unspoiled coastline and interior landscapes that skip from mountain ranges to grassy valleys to badlands. "America's Galápagos" is the islands' honorific, and it's no exaggeration. The green-minded have lobbied for decades to protect, for example, 43 endemic plant species, six varieties of seals and walruses, and the sort of tide-pool societies that have all but disappeared from the California coast. In 1980, more than 40 years after Franklin Roosevelt gave two of the islands national monument status, Congress designated Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, San Miguel, Anacapa, and Santa Barbara our 40th national park. (San Clemente and San Nicolas remain navy property, and Catalina remains . . . Catalina.)

Even on parkland, however, it's not all pristine wilderness and Ranger Rick hospitality. Vail & Vickers, for instance, has retained land-use rights on Santa Rosa for another 25 years—and one such use is its sponsorship of elk hunts, at \$7,500 a head. In 1937, the Caire family sold most of Santa Cruz to a Los Angeles businessman named Edwin Stanton, whose son Carey sold the property to the Nature Conservancy 40 years later. The park service co-owns the eastern tip of the island with Justinian Caire's great-grandson, Francis



A pier at Prisoners' Harbor.

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A Channel Islands Guide

Santa Cruz is the largest and most diverse of the five islands that make up Channel Islands National Park—but each of the others offers unique wilderness values.

Anacapa The most accessible part of the park—lying 11 miles southwest of Oxnard—actually comprises three mountainous islets. Dormant vegetation gives way to giant coreopsis in the spring, following whale-watching season. West Anacapa is noted for its tide pools.

San Miguel A sandy, windswept plateau set 26 miles from Point Conception. A ghostly caliche forest contains the calcified sheaths of plants that died thousands of years ago.

Santa Barbara The southernmost island in the park, and the smallest. Native vegetation is recovering from earlier farming and grazing. Excellent bird-watching.

Santa Rosa At 150 square miles, this is the second-largest park island. It's mostly blanketed by non-native grasslands concealing more than 180 archaeological sites.

Gherini, who maintains some 3,000 wild merinos there, along with a small landing strip for guests especially eager to bag trophy rams and yearling ewes. Gherini has tried to market his property as a site for a golf course and luxury houses, but he's holding out for a better offer from the park service.

Another challenge for the Channel Islands National Park is its relatively modest profile. Signs for the park, sprouting along Highway 101 about midway between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, are prominent and plentiful. Follow the arrows down to Ventura Harbor, however, and you'll find not a park but a visitor center. It's an attractive, informative visitor center, with a simulated tide pool and a diorama of island fauna and a half-hour introductory video; the uninitiated quickly learn that the park's most accessible portions lie an hour and a half offshore—and that you need reservations for the trip. (In accordance with privatization laws enacted under Governor Reagan, boat tickets are booked through a commercial outfit, Island Packers, and now start at \$49 for adults.) This is one reason why more people troop to Joshua Tree National Monument in a month than visit the Channel Islands National Park in a year. Which is one more reason to visit the islands.

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On a hazy September morning, I boarded the *Jeffrey Arvid* for Santa Cruz Island and watched the Ventura Harbor moorings disappear behind a gauze of gas fumes. Robin Roe, our Nature Conservancy guide, delivered a few remarks about the waters around us; the engines of the *Jeffrey Arvid* throttled her scratchy mike. To acclimate to the pitch and roll of the boat, I focused on the receding coast and then the oil wells five miles offshore, where on January 28, 1969, Union Oil's Platform A fractured the ocean bottom and leaked 3 million gallons, killing a year's worth of seal, walrus, and sea lion pups.

Just when the view from the stern was getting boring, Anacapa's jagged islets materialized in front of us. Five miles to the west, behind a thick, swirling nimbus, the high cliffs of Santa Cruz sprang up. "The rock you're looking at is a combination of schist and volcanic," said Robin, her voice now intelligible. We drifted toward an ancient *Planet of the Apes* beach, girded by reddish bluffs and silent except for the water surging around the coves at either end. The *Jeffrey Arvid* rounded a point, and we put into Prisoners' Harbor.

There were about 20 of us, all ages and affiliations, all wearing lug soles and too much clothing. ("Dress in layers," the somewhat ominous park literature advised. "Cliffs may be undercut. Obey all signs. Weather conditions change rapidly.") When everyone was ashore, Robin informed us that Prisoners' Harbor got its name

THE FACTS

Channel Islands National Park

1901 Spinnaker Dr., Ventura; 805/658-5730. Operates a visitor center and headquarters on the mainland.

Island Packers

1867 Spinnaker Dr., Ventura; 805/642-1393.

Provides boat service to the east side of Santa Cruz on weekends year-round and to the west side on scheduled weekends in the spring and summer; fares start at \$49 per person round-trip.

There are also daily excursions to Anacapa, and less frequent weekend day trips to Santa Rosa, San Miguel, and Santa Barbara, along with whale-watching and kayaking island tours. Book three weeks ahead in summer, a week ahead the rest of the year.

The Nature Conservancy

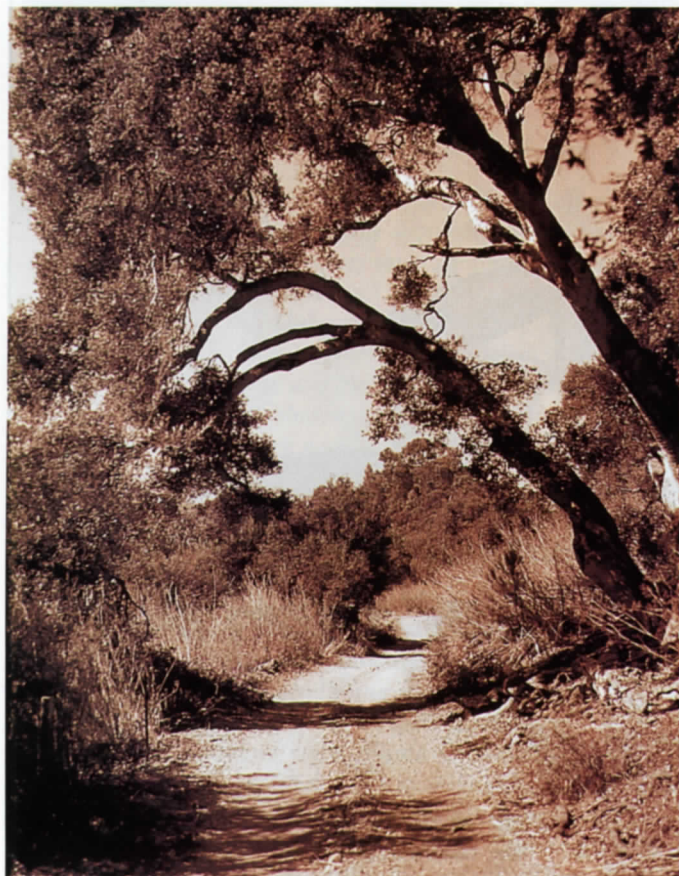
213 Stearns Wharf, Santa Barbara;

805/962-9111. Manages the Santa Cruz Island Preserve; sponsors day trips to the island as well as volunteer programs and a four-day field trip under the tutelage of ecologists, botanists, and geologists.

from a boatload of Mexican convicts who were dropped off here in 1830 after being turned away at San Diego and Santa Barbara. Once on Santa Cruz, legend holds they promptly fashioned rafts and floated back to Santa Barbara. It was hard to fathom: a stand of eucalyptus shaded our path, the water behind us glittered, and the scents of pine and sage hitched a breeze.

We hiked up a steep trail and followed its twists along the palisades above the coast. Robin identified saplings of manzanita, ceanothus, bishop pine—most less than five years old, beneficiaries of the conservancy's sheep-eradication program. The 3,000 sheep that Francis Gherini keeps are said to be less than respectful of their frontiers, and remain the object of much concern. The switchbacks presented us with hawk's-eye views of the Pacific. At a clearing by a massive ironwood tree, a hairy-trunked variety that disappeared from the coast 3 million years ago, we stopped for lunch.

Life on the islands is sort of like life after high school: the big species shrink a little and the small ones grow. The island scrub jay is bluer and 25 percent larger than its mainland counterpart. If the taxidermy at the visitor center is any indication, the island fox is no bigger than my neighbor's Abyssinian cat. A femur of a pygmy mammoth is also on display at the center. Robin told us that this oxymoronic island native evolved from the woolly mammoth, which at 12 feet tall was twice the height of its descendant. "Any ideas how the woolly got here?" she asked. I had difficulty picturing the animal, let alone its means of island-hopping. "Scientists have pretty much abandoned the idea that the islands were connected to the mainland, at least since the Ice Age, so the woollies must have swum."



Track leading to the ranch, Santa Cruz.

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After we'd eaten and peeled off a layer or two, our diligent packhorse file slowed and stretched until I lost sight of everyone ahead of me. Behind me a woman in a cowboy hat groaned with every rise and fall of the trail. Until recently, the trail had primarily conveyed sheep. For humans the steep grades and snaking curves made a half-day hike out of the two-mile trip to Pelican Bay, our destination. We caught up with the rest of the group at a promontory above a broad beach. The woman in the hat wanted to know where the pelicans were. "A little farther," Robin murmured.

The headland we stood on formed an arm of Pelican Bay, a quiet inlet ringed by black wave-cut benches. A couple named Ira and Margaret Eaton ran a small resort here in the twenties, catering to silent-film crews shooting on the island. Nothing is left of the place except shards of crockery, Robin told us, which can be scavenged from the bottom of the bay. "In fact, much remains to be done on Santa Cruz in the way of removing introduced plants and animals and materials. The Conservancy relies on volunteer efforts, whether it's pulling out an old fence or ripping up wild fennel. . . ."

After Robin's pitch, Randy, a member of the *Jeffrey Arvid* crew, informed us that while we'd been hiking he'd

been diving. "We've got the second-greatest diversity of fauna in the world here," he said, "because of this." He lifted the lid from an Igloo cooler and, with a little flourish, extracted a piece of kelp. With the timing of a magician, he showed us squirting slugs; brittle stars, which grow back arms; and starfish, which don't. He held up a spiky, eggplant-colored sea urchin that looked like something Elizabeth Taylor would donate to the Smithsonian. A woman with a European accent asked what sex it was. Randy replied that urchins were genderless. The woman said she was from France, where they ate the gonads of urchins. Randy slowly curled a strand of blond hair behind his wraparound sunglasses before letting her know that he had been an Island Packers guide for six years.

The Frenchwoman was still inspecting the undersides of the urchins when a rubber raft pulled up to ferry the first load of passengers back to the *Jeffrey Arvid*. I decided I'd wait for a later pickup. The sun hit the water and the wet rocks with a clarity that was hypnotic, and I was thinking less about leaving than coming back. Maybe not to rip out fennel, maybe not even to Santa Cruz. Above Cuyler Harbor on San Miguel, there's a small stone monument to Juan Cabrillo, who may or may not have been buried on the island, erected by Herbert Lester, who definitely was. ●